

# 5 Words That Broke My Mom's Heart (and How She Responded)



"Hey, Brenda, is it... is it OK if I sit here maybe?"

"Sorry. Our table is full."

I was in fourth grade. I was new at school. And each day I ate lunch alone. I would often sit at the end of a long table of people -- near enough to try to blend into a group, but far enough away not to face an overt rejection. I tried to look busy, taking long, slow bites of my favorite bologna and cheese sandwich. I would scribble in notebooks and steal frequent glances at the clock. I prayed for time to move faster. After a while, I began sneaking into a stall in the girl's bathroom and waiting out the lunch hour.

This experience hurt. It hurt to not belong to a tribe. It hurt to feel inadequate.

I wanted to tell my mom. I wanted to tell her that things weren't "fine" like I said every single day when she asked about school. I wanted to tell her that I was embarrassed to sit at a lunch table by myself. I wanted to tell her that I felt a sea of eyes on me and that I knew people were wondering what was wrong with me. I wanted to ask her what *was* wrong with me. But I couldn't do that, because my mom loved me and I knew she would try to fix my problem. She would try to call other moms and make me friends. She would do this out of love, but it would make me feel worse. So I ignored the problem.

I ate lunch alone for months and remained stoic until one day I came home, went straight to my room and burst into tears. The pain of my loneliness could no longer be contained. My mom came in and sat down on the bed beside me.

She gently asked, "Honey, what's been going on?"

Finally, I said, "Mommy, I eat lunch alone."

I thought I heard a crack -- those five words broke a small piece of my mom's heart. I could see the pain in her eyes.

Then I waited. I waited for the barrage of questions about why I was eating alone and how come I didn't make an effort to sit with so-and-so. I waited for her to suggest meeting up with some of the kid's moms from school so she could help me make friends. I waited for her to say she was going to call the school principal and give him a piece of her mind. I waited for the problem-solving campaign to kick off, but it never did.

Instead, my mom said to me, "Baby, I know it hurts. When I came to this country from India I didn't know anyone. Did you know that?"

"But you have lots of friends."

"Now I do, honey, but I didn't know anyone when I came. And I didn't drive and I barely spoke the language. And when I got my first job as a preschool teaching assistant, I also ate my lunch alone for a while. It made me feel sad. Is that how you feel?"

"Yeah, it makes me sad and, well, mostly embarrassed."

"Yes, that's something we go through sometimes. But you know what I learned? Most hard things we face in life don't last forever. Honey, tell me more about how you feel."

That day my mom and I connected. I learned over time that it's easy to connect with her because, with no formal training whatsoever, my mom is a natural emotion coach. She listens. She really listens. She doesn't shy away from stepping into the pain of another person. In this, she is able to connect deeply with others. Inspired by my mom's ability to heal and by my own social and emotional challenges growing up, I've made it my life's mission to give kids simple coping tools to help overcome challenges.

I have my own kids now, and if my daughter came to me one day and said, "Mommy, I eat lunch alone," I know a small piece of my heart would also break. But I would try these steps to help:

## **1. Empathize**

It's our knee-jerk reaction to problem solve for our children. Immediate problem-solving can backfire as it allows no room for the negative emotions to surface. Kids want to know we get what they're going through, and their emotions need a voice. So, even if you haven't gone through the same exact experience, you've likely experienced the emotions they are feeling, relay that to them. Replace the words "It's going to be OK" with "I get it" or "I understand you."

## **2. Label emotions**

Help kids label their emotions. When children experience emotions such as jealousy, rage and humiliation for the first time, they often call those emotions "sadness" or "anger." Really drilling

down into the particular emotions they feel can help demystify the experience and make them more manageable.

### **3. Create a better story**

Research reveals the hallmarks of optimistic people are the ability to explain challenges as temporary and specific. In other words, optimistic children see there is an end in sight to their challenge and that their whole life isn't affected by it. Fortunately, this skill can be learned. Here are some specific examples for clarity:

a. *Permanent vs. Temporary* explanations of challenges

Permanent (pessimistic): I'm always going to eat lunch alone.

Temporary (optimistic): Eating lunch on my own won't last forever.

b. *Pervasive vs. Specific* explanations of challenges

Pervasive (pessimistic): My whole life is terrible.

Specific (optimistic): Lunch time is challenging for me.

### **4. Employ strength-based problem solving**

Helping your child with any problem requires a holistic understanding of the issue (e.g., factors including your child, other kids, the community, past experiences). Once you understand the issue, approach the solution by assessing your child's greatest character strengths. Are they resourceful? Funny? Creative? Use their strengths in crafting a solution. They might even like to take a research-based strength survey to uncover their superhero-like qualities.

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